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JCS PASS J-5/CDR S. WRIGHT

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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT

THURSDAY, MAY 1, 2008

In Today's Papers

Tensions Escalate Prior to May Day Celebrations in Istanbul
All news outlets report tight security in Istanbul's Taksim Square where Turkey's major labor unions and civic organizations are planning to celebrate May Day. All roads leading to Taksim Square are closed, and 25,000 policemen will be deployed in the area to block the demonstrations. Labor unions DISK and KESK have announced that 500,000 workers will gather in Taksim Square to mark May Day. Justice Minister Mehmet Ali Sahin said Wednesday, "Labor unions are defying a constitutional order by holding May 1 rallies in Taksim Square." President Abdullah Gul has expressed regret regarding the escalation of tensions, and stressed that he would ask the government to declare May 1 official holiday.

All news outlets feature the impasse between the government and labor unions over permission to hold May Day celebrations. Coverage recalls the 1977 May Day demonstrations in Istanbul's Taksim Square during which 36 people were killed. This event was largely viewed as the beginning of the provocations that led to the 1980 military coup. Mainstream Sabah writes, "The Siege of Taksim Means the Workers' Day Will Be Celebrated with Teargas and Barricades." Mainstream Milliyet writes, "Happy May Day," as "The World Celebrates May Day While Tensions Between Labor Unions and the Government in Turkey Escalate." Conservative-nationalist Turkiye writes, "Istanbul is Paralyzed Amid Controversy about May Day Celebrations." Liberal Radikal notes in "Democracy's May Day Test," that, "Erdogan calls the labor unions' insistence to hold May Day celebrations 'not well-intentioned.'" Nationalist-oriented Cumhuriyet's banner headline reads, "This Is Just Like the Days of Martial Law," as "The AKP government is determined to poison the Worker's Day." Conservative Bugun writes in "May Day Torture," that, "Indignant Labor Unions Turn Taksim into A State of Emergency." Extreme Right Tercuman writes, "Beware of Tensions: Traitors Want to Stage Provocations on May Day." Mainstream Vatan writes, "Erdogan's Provocative Words End in a Nightmare in Istanbul." Mainstream Aksam notes, "There is Emergency Rule in

Istanbul as Subways, Buses, and Boats Will Not Be in Service Today and 66 Schools are Closed in Taksim." Islamist-oriented Zaman notes, "31 Years Ago, 36 Labor Union Supporters Died in May Day Clashes," but warns, "The Labor Unions Did Not Take Care of the Families of Those Who Died."

Editorial Commentary on May Day

"Common Sense is Gone"

Can Dundar wrote in mainstream Milliyet (5/1): "Unions are insisting on May Day celebrations in Taksim Square for a reason. In 1977, the so-called 'Deep State' organization turned May Day celebrations in Taksim into bloodshed. Now labor unions want to celebrate in Taksim as a symbolic sign of solidarity. The ruling AKP refused to permit labor unions' celebrations in Taksim, which was a lost opportunity for the AKP and for Turkey. The AKP could have allowed the unions to celebrate May Day, which would have served as an opportunity for the AKP to gain credit with the unions. Instead, Turkey, once again, turned itself toward the mentality of intolerance. Thus, intolerance has prevailed over common sense."

"The AKP Seems Like It Is Searching For Isolation"

Ali Bayramoglu wrote in Islamist Yeni Safak (5/1): "While anti-AKP circles make irrational attempts to corner the ruling party, the AKP is also taking steps to isolate itself. Opportunities are ignored and chances are missed for creating democratic alliances, especially at this time of immediate need. The ruling AKP had the chance to abolish Article 301, and it was missed. On the Kurdish issue, the government pursued harsh rhetoric that was nearly compatible with military rhetoric. The government is in charge with 47 percent support; at the very least, the AKP owes the people some democratic courage. Fighting with union leaders, calling workers' concerns 'riff-raff,' and engaging in a symbolic fight over May Day

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celebrations are the wrong steps to take in this political environment."

"The AKP's Secret Mentality"

Ahmet Altan wrote in leftist Taraf (5/1): "Unfortunately, Turkey is still haunted by the September 12, 1980 military coup. The mentality at that time was fiercely intolerant. However, it is really hard to understand the reason why the AKP fully embraces an intolerant approach set by the military coup. The military regime banned labor union marches, and today the AKP is doing the same thing. Streets are closed, barricades are erected, and workers are prevented from celebrating a holiday. The government is justifying its actions with fears of provocations. But aren't clashes between police and demonstrators provocative? The AKP's bans are fueling polarization. The more the AKP acts with intolerance, the more the AKP reflects the mentality of the September 12, 1980 coup."

[Background: May Day was a national holiday until the 1980 military coup. Prior to the 1980 coup, labor unions traditionally organized large gatherings in Istanbul's Taksim Square. In 1977, May Day Celebrations ended in bloodshed when 36 died after someone opened fire on the crowd of 500,000. Later, papers reported the so-called "Deep State" was involved in the violence and thus it was an act of provocation. The military coup of 1980 ordered a full ban on May Day celebrations and annulled the May Day holiday.]

AKP Submits Its Defense in Closure Case

All papers report the AKP submitted its preliminary defense to the Constitutional Court in the lawsuit for disbanding Turkey's ruling party. The defense claims the case was "politically motivated," and that the AKP, "was not the focal point of actions against secularism." Leftist Taraf writes, "AKP Hides Behind the Venice Criteria," saying that "according to Venice Criteria, only parties that support violence can be closed." The defense also says the political ban demanded for President Abdullah Gul is "unconstitutional," stressing presidents can only be tried on treason charges. The defense notes the headscarf reforms proposal was prepared together with the opposition MHP, and was passed by the parliament with the backing of 411 lawmakers.

Mainstream Milliyet calls the defense a "Thematic Defense," as the defense claims the chief prosecutor's charges are, "rooted in politics," with "no legal basis." Liberal Radikal notes, "The defense argues that the party is not tied to a great many of the charges." Specifically, Radikal notes, "The defense calls Parliamentary Speaker Bulent Arinc's statements non-binding to the AKP," because, "The defense claims Arinc was above politics and thus not tied to the party when he served as parliamentary speaker." Columnist Rusen Cakir of mainstream Vatan writes in "Erdogan Goes to the Guillotine," that "Erdogan is not optimistic about the outcome of the closure case, but he also does not want to appear weak," and "submitting the defense early is a sign of Erdogan's self-confidence." In addition, Cakir says, "Erdogan wants an end to this crisis soon," which proves, "he is willing to sacrifice his political career for the sake of his country." Meanwhile, columnist Bilal Cetin of mainstream Vatan writes, "The AKP would likely face defeat in a referendum regarding constitutional reforms." Thus he says, "Due to his fear of failure in a referendum, Erdogan is not sharing his strategy for dealing with the closure case." In addition, Cetin notes, "If the Constitutional Court annuls the AKP's headscarf reforms as a violation against constitutional secularism, it will strengthen the prosecutor's allegations against the AKP." Sukru Kucuksahin of mainstream Hurriyet writes, "The opposition CHP Leader Baykal has also referred to religion in speeches, particularly the one he gave on April 23rd." Kucuksahin asks, "Since leaders of other political parties have made comments regarding religion, will the court see that the AKP is not the center of anti-secular activities?" Columnist Huseyin Gulerce of Islamist-oriented Zaman writes, "The only way for the AKP to find a

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way out of this is to take its constitutional amendments to a referendum." Columnist Mustafa Erdogan of mainstream Star writes, "The AKP thinks a good defense will save them," but he recommends to the AKP, "Do not believe that even a good defense can save you."

Turkey-Iraq Strategic Dialogue

Hurriyet, Vatan, Zaman, Radikal: Mainstream Hurriyet reports that Turkey and Iraq are establishing a strategic dialogue mechanism in the fight against PKK. Turkey's special envoy to Iraq Murat Ozelik and PM Erdogan's foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu will go to Baghdad within a week to hold contacts with Iraqi officials. Ozelik and Davutoglu are expected to hold talks with Iraqi PM Maliki, President Talabani, and Kurdish Regional Administration's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. Islamist-oriented Zaman highlights that the meeting between the Turkish delegation and Nechirvan Barzani will be the first high-level contact between Turkey and the Kurdish Administration in northern Iraq. Mainstream Vatan reports that the Turkish delegation will not go to northern Iraq and all contacts will take place in Baghdad. Vatan adds that Talabani's deputy Tarik El-Hasimi will meet with President Gul and PM Erdogan in Ankara today.

U.S. Report on Global Terrorism for 2007

Milliyet and Vatan: The 2007 U.S. Report on Global Terrorism emphasizes that last year 22,000 people were killed by the terrorists. The report noted the PKK continued its separatist activities and attacked Turkish Security Forces from their bases in northern Iraq. Following the Bush-Erdogan meeting on November 5 at the White House, the Turkish military carried out operations against the PKK along the Turkey-Iraq border. The report also highlights that the PKK continued to use Belgium as a financial base for its terrorist activities. Milliyet reports that Saudi businessman Yasin El-Kadi, whose name is on the UN's terrorism financier list, was on the U.S. Global Terrorism report as well.

TV Highlights

CNN Turk

Domestic News

- President Abdullah Gul will travel to Macedonia to participate in a meeting of the heads of state of Central European countries from May 1-3.

- Higher Education Board (YOK) President Professor Yusuf Ziya Ozcan

said during a meeting with the ambassadors from EU countries,
"Headscarf restrictions at universities will be abolished."

- Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom will pay a formal visit to Turkey on May 6.

International News

- Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki vows to disband the Shiite Mahdi Army, Sunni insurgent groups, and al-Qaeda in Iraq.

- U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said sending a second aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf could serve as a 'reminder' to Iran.

- The Simon Wiesenthal Institute has published a list of the top 10 most wanted Nazi war criminals.

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